Literature

Nine Yiddish Writers

Harry Rogoff.

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Critical Appreciations

By

HARRY ROGOFF

FOREWORD

In the assembling and publication in book-form of these appreciations of Yiddish writers by HARRY ROGOFF there is an appropriateness that is especially marked at this time: the old gods of Yiddish writing are securely enthroned; the new are yet enshrouded in uncertainty.

At such a time it is well to turn back these interesting pages of Yiddish literary history in America. Random though these notations may be, they are peep-holes through which the observant eye may gather some estimate of the scope and liveliness of that literary activity which engaged the lover of Yiddish literature a decade or two ago. In these pages, taken out of the short-lived journal "EAST AND WEST," of which Mr. Rogoff was the editor, the student no less than the casual reader may find instruction as well as pleasure.

In these brief essays, filled with intimate observations on the lives and work of representative Yiddish writers, we are brought into contact with a mind that

has been at all times keenly responsive to the creative forces in Jewish life, helpfully proud of the best impulses, intellectual and spiritual, in the Jewish community. For here, set down at a time when reputations were still in the balance, are judgments which time has sustained and insights which are no less pointed because they have won general acceptance.

It must be clear to that friend of Yiddish literature, who is also a reader in it, that these critical sketches of Rogoff's have their validity in our own time. A reading of them, fifteen years after they were written, shows that they were a natural outgrowth of that movement of self-analysis and self-criticism of which American Yiddish literature stood so greatly in need. Although creative workers are never too numerous, Yiddish writers were plentiful. The controversies of the day pointed to the need of some clarification of the diverse impulses which were alive in the literary movements of those days.

To that unsettled period Rogoff brought his contribution of a sound critical mind reinforced by familiarity with the criteria that have shaped the great literatures of the world.

His discernment and critical honesty gave him the

right to set up those criteria of artistic integrity so sorely needed by writers who were wholly absorbed in the battle of the work-a-day world. The Yiddish writer, knowing few of the comforts that come with the support of a leisured middle-class, has always been in the midst of that daily battle for a livelihood.

"To be sincere and faithful in art is as difficult as to be sincere and faithful in other activities of life," is a view with which Rogoff admonished these writers. Whereupon he pointed out that the artist's mission is "to see life as it is and to depict it in its own colors,"—the comic together with the grim; the idealistic and the noble, together with the sordid; the hopeful as well as the despairing; the tender and poetic as validly as the brutal. In other words, Rogoff was spokesman of the idea that the artist dare not take sides in the business of life since he has business in his own domain, with demands and standards, with purposes and ideals that are sufficiently exacting to call for the very best in the artist.

Varied as are the subjects of these essays, this one point of view informs them all—the vigorous insistence on the integrity of the writer. There must be "no compromise," says Rogoff, "but (only) a firm

faith in one's art." Again and again he raises his voice against the inclination, on the part of some of these men he speaks for, to yield to the forces external to their own sincerest impulses.

Nor is Rogoff one-sided in his appreciation. Given over to an interest and a genuine enjoyment of the work of the realist, he is capable at the same time of generous acceptance and interpretation of the sincere production of such originals as L. Shapiro and Jonah Rosenfeld. In viewing such work, Rogoff stands by the individual promptings of the writer, with no preconceptions and no exactions other than that the artist create firmly and persuasively in his own image.

If it is a new world which the writer has created, one which the reader cannot verify by the test of "life as it is," and "in its own colors," Rogoff asks whether it takes shape and color, dimension and dynamic reality from the authentic vision which has fostered it. If so, he is for it. Thus he says of a story by Shapiro: "The story is not real, but it is a great achievement, nevertheless. For an artist has conceived it, nurtured it, loved it, named it with his own light, strengthened it with his blood. It has existence because an artist has created it."

One must conclude that the magazine "EAST AND WEST," which was the occasion of excellent pioneer work in the presentation of Yiddish writing to American readers, was the occasion also of presenting to Yiddish writers a critic who spoke for them with sympathy, courage, and discernment.

HENRY GOODMAN.

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MORRIS ROSENFELD

An Appreciation

From EAST AND WEST

May, 1915

THERE was a time when a hierarchy of literary gods reigned over the intellectual elements of the East Side. On Mount Parnassus of the Ghetto sat enthroned the higher and lesser divinities—each in his undisputed place, each enjoying the devotion of hosts of worshippers.

That was in the beginning of things—fifteen, twenty years ago—when Yiddish playwrights peddled newspapers for a living, and Yiddish poets composed their songs while threading needles in the sweat shops. Literature then was a thankless task; and only their mutual encouragement and sympathy kept the Gods from abdicating en masse.

In those rainy, chilly April days of Yiddish letters in this country, Morris Rosenfeld was the acknowledged poet of the ghetto. None contested that title, none begrudged it. He bemoaned the Ghetto's sorrows and pains; he ridiculed its pretentions and foibles; he glorified its strivings and ideals.

But times have changed since. In fact, as well as in myth, Gods don't dwell in peace very long. There came a moment when supremacy meant power, useful utilitarian power; and the Gods began to battle for position. The war extended over half a decade, and was carried on in the usual brutal manner. Reputations were dragged down into the mire. Holy books were torn into shreds by the merciless hand of criticism. In the general eruption none was spared. Each destroyed and was destroyed in turn. Thus do gods fight.

Rosenfeld shared the common fate. He was attacked and criticized. His genius was called into question; his personality was denounced. And though the battle has almost subsided, he is still being harassed and tormented.

No other Yiddish writer has suffered so much abuse, so much ridicule, at the hands of his colleagues. Each and every one of his faults, weaknesses and mistakes have formed themes for innumerable attacks and satires in the press. And defenders he has none, none but his own venomous pen. For the truth must be told, Rosenfeld has admirers, adorers, worshippers; but of friends, sincere, hearty friends, he has none.

And that is the tragedy of the poet, who for a quarter of a century has sung the tragedy of the most tragic nation in history.

Behold him pacing the street in the Yiddish newspaper row where he comes once or twice a week to see his editor. He is alone. In one hand a heavy cane, in the other a book or manuscript. There is a perceptible limp in his step, the result of an apoplectic attack that almost sent him to the grave ten years ago. Sometimes his face is calm and smooth. Other times it is filled with anguish that seems to express bodily pain as well as mental suffering.

In his greeting one cannot fail to observe an internal sick nervousness. It consists of an exaggerated bow, a piercing glance followed by a smile, a chuckle and a peculiar remark.

His forehead and skull are also striking. Thin silky hair, standing erect in disorderly array, cover a perfectly round head. Beneath is a high forehead, furrowed and almost always of ruddy tinge. You glance at it and you are struck. You know that enclosed in that skull lodges a restless, impulsive, fiery brain.

Hear him talk, or rather watch him talk. What expressiveness, what exaggerated emphasis, what passionate insistence. He nudges you with his elbow, demands approval of every remark, dictates your answers. You wonder, is he sincere? Is his soul on fire? One moment he pouts like a child, another he denounces like a prophet, the third he flatters like a lackey, the fourth he glories like a king. It's acting, you conclude, acting of the high artistic kind, that is full of soul and heart. Perhaps, but listen to the subject matter and you will be convinced that you are mistaken. He talks on a topic that is nearest and dearest to his soul, he speaks of the one thing in which his entire being is centered. Yes, he speaks of himself, always himself.

Vanity, the power and the weakness of the artist, has been Rosenfeld's good and bad angel in life. It was the desire of glory, the dream of renown and distinction, that marvelous passion that chained Balzac eighteen hours a day to his writing desk, which also made of the poor little sweatshop tailor a poet whose fame will endure for many, many years. But that same passion is responsible for the many practical errors he has committed, for a great measure of suffering he has endured, for the utter destitution in which he is now placed.

One day his face is bright, his walk light, his head erect. Just stop him a while and you will know the reason. A critic in Hungary has praised his work, a publisher in Germany is preparing a new edition of his songs, or perhaps a letter from an admirer has offered some incense. On the next day his face is a sombre cloud, his eyes dull, his head and shoulders drooping—a critic wrote favorably of another Jewish poet, a publisher undertook the publication of one of his colleague's songs. That and nothing more.

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Yiddish literature has just struck root. Its stem is hardly visible above ground. The destiny fate prepared for it no one can tell with absolute certainty. Every literary plant needs the firm soil of nationality for its roots, and the sunshine and moisture of national culture for its nourishment, and these elements are very uncertain with the Jewish people in spite of the fact that an intense wave of the national spirit has been agitating its most important centers in Europe and America.

However, if Jewish literature is destined to live and grow, Rosenfeld will undoubtedly occupy in it the rank of a classic. For Rosenfeld possesses the es-

sential and peculiar qualities that assure for the literary man lasting memory.

To begin with, Rosenfeld is before all else a Jewish writer. His is the truly national genius. His pathos, his humor, his satire, his general outlook upon life, are all unmistakably Jewish. Like many of his colleagues, Rosenfeld had no liberal education, no European culture. He began to study English and read German after his genius had ripened. Since then, he has read widely in all poetry, but that only helped to develop him on the road he had started. It didn't broaden his view, it didn't enrich his ideas, it didn't corrupt his intensely Jewish individuality.

His second claim to classic prominence is his wide universal appeal. In the age of literary restlessness and iconoclasm, when the healthy commonplace passions are almost tabooed and all but adventitious growths fill the garden of letters, Rosenfeld remains faithful to the sound and sane school. He deals with the sorrow and joys that are known to all Jewish hearts—the same emotions that thrilled their ancestors generations ago, and that will agitate the souls of their offspring for the generations to come. Symbolism, mysticism, decadence—all these

are foreign to him. He ridicules them in his writings and denounces them in his conversation.

And he is as simple and lucid in his style as in his substance. That is his third hold on classic survival. Rosenfeld helped to create and model a literary idiom in Jewish literature. Himself thoroughly saturated with the Jewish spirit, all his verbal inventions are characteristically Yiddish. His coinages are hardly ever rejected, hardly ever modified. He will forever remain an authority on style and idiom.

Speaking from a purely layman's standpoint, Rosenfeld should be thoroughly content with the conquest he has made, with the terrority that is universally conceded to him beyond dispute. To rise out of an obscure sweatshop, out of suffering and disappointment and misery, and to attain those glorious heights of literary fame, is indeed a happiness that befalls only the few chosen by the Gods. But Rosenfeld is not happy. His soul craves for tribute, for incessant worship, for constant reward, and this society refuses to grant him.

THE GENIUS OF PEREZ

From EAST AND WEST

June, 1915

A TRUE literary genius embodies the age in which he is born. He absorbs it and expresses it. He is to his society what the sun is to the earth, shedding its rays and bestowing its warmth upon all, giving light to the stone, and color to the flower, stirring the cock to crow and the lark to sing, laying bare the poisonous marsh in all its hideousness, and the rippling stream in all its splendor.

And the true literary genius is as rare as the suns are in heaven. Planets and stars, constellations of all kinds, bigger and smaller, may fill the skies in numbers uncountable; but the great sun, the source of all light is always one; and sometimes long, long nights pass before it looms up on the horizon and climbs into the center of heaven in the full display of its glory.

The first genius in Yiddish literature was Isaac Leibush Perez. He was born in a little town in Russian Poland, in the year 1851, when Jewish hopes

seemed to glisten in the distance; his genius blossomed in the eighties, when the first blast of the pogroms wiped out all light and hope; and his life expired just a few weeks ago, amidst the deluge of blood that came pouring upon the Jewish communities in the wake of the terrible war.

The old Jewish myth endowed the Jewish race with three Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This myth is a reality in Yiddish literature. Its fathers are indeed three, though, unlike the fabled analogy, they were all of the same generation. Two of them are still among the living—Abramovitz who has nearly completed his eightieth year, and Rabinovitz, who is but a few years younger than was his deceased colleague, Perez.

We term them fathers in no mere figurative sense. With them Yiddish literature was born. They created it out of nothingness. Before them all was chaos. Abramovitz was the first on the scene, and to his lot fell a great part of the preparatory work. He cleared the ground of the rubbish with which it was covered, ploughed it and turned the sod. Like Abraham, the first of the Patriarchs, Abramowitz discovered the God, the spirit of Yiddish literature, and entered into a covenant with it. Before him

literary Jews wrote in Hebrew. Yiddish they despised as a barbarous jargon, a "language of captivity," an emblem of slavery, unsuited and impossible for artistic purposes. They called Hebrew the "mistress" and Yiddish, her "handmaiden."

And all these epithets ascribed to the language were indeed true. In order to write literature in Yiddish, the language had to be molded and cast into an artistic form. Abramovitz took up the task and accomplished it to wonderful perfection. This the first and perhaps the greatest service that he did to his literature.

But he went still further. With these implements that he had himself created, he dug up the raw material from which precious literary metals were later extracted. He was the first of the Yiddish writers who turned to the study of the Jew as a distinct people, a nation amongst nations, a race amongst races. He portrayed the Jewish tragedy in allegory and in fiction. He embodied both the merits and defects of all Jews in general types, heroic, pathetic, and pitiful. His literature is social, racial. His plots are puerile, the characters uncertain, the style confusing. But there is spirit and soul pervading it all—there is a living atmosphere in which his

creatures breathe and act, and that spirit and soul and atmosphere are Jewish, thoroughly and profoundly Jewish.

Abramovitz laid bare the great sources of passion and emotion that stir in the Jewish heart; he revealed the general outlines of the social structure the Jew has built for himself in the ghettoes of Russia and Poland; he threw out in bold relief a sketch of the Jew's internal tragedy resulting from his terrible position amongst the nations. It was a gigantic achievement, a great literary feat that he had accomplished. As a pioneer, no greater work could have been wrought by him.

But speaking from a strictly artistic standpoint, Abramovitz did not possess the "key that opens the golden gate." There is too much argument and too little life in all his creations. His artistic eye never penetrated deep into the heart of things. Rather was the light diffused, spread out and dim. Very rarely does he grow ecstatic or exalted; very rarely does he lose his "presence of mind" in the flood of emotion.

It was left to the two younger fathers of Yiddish literature, Rabinovitz (Sholem Aleichem) and Perez to enter into the very holy of holies of literary art.

And they earned that honorable distinction of being called "fathers," though coming later than Abramovitz, because they were the first to approach the shrine, and light the taper of Yiddish literature at the sacred fire. Abramovitz discovered the road, cleared it, laid out the path, and led the procession, but never entered into God's land. Perez and Rabinowitz, who followed him all the way, marched in and conquered.

And of these two conquerors, Perez was by far the mightier, the greater. Sholem Aleichem dubbed himself Grandson of old Grandfather Abramovitz, and tried hard to follow in his footsteps, to imitate his manner and ways; and imitation and discipleship are poison to genuine creative power. Sholem Aleichem's artistic powers are also limited. He is essentially a humorist. His eye always seeks out the comic, the laughable in life; and, like all humorists, he at times grows pathetic, sentimentally pathetic. But neither the comic nor the pathetic in life are vital or essential. They may tickle the soul or touch it, but never stir it. They may affect our mood, pacify our passion, lighten our hearts; but they will not impel us into action, drive us into effort, into destruction or creation; and what is life if not action —action that either creates or destroys?

Perez it was who knew this great secret and who also possessed the power to follow its urging. And that is why we call him the first true genius of Yiddish literature, our first great literary mind who embodied his age, who absorbed it and gave it expression.

Jewish life is never at a standstill. For no length of time is its history stable, balanced. The nation, like the individual, is ever restless, ever nervous, ever pushing on, pressing forward. That is why the Jewish element of every civilized country is always in the vanguard of progress, be it material, intellectual or moral.

The slow, slight evolution in industrial development that Russia underwent in the last few decades had but an imperceptible effect on the great peasant population of that country. At most it modified somewhat its material condition, but it hardly touched its social life, and certainly never influenced its mental or moral condition. But the Jewish element in that country was stirred to its very foundation. In the short space of half a century, Jewish life in Russia evolved from a state of mediævalism to that of advanced modernism. In every phase of his life the Jew responded to the impulse. He re-

formed his religion, he rebuilt his social structure, he changed his mouldy views on industry, politics and morals. He filled his soul with new ideals, he fired his blood with fresh hopes. He built himself new gods in the image of the spirit of civilized Europe.

This period of "*Sturm und Drang*" in the life of the Russian Jew was intensified by the terrible obstacles he encountered on his way, by the terrible resistance and repulses he met with at every step and on every turn. It was a severe struggle against united powers, intrinsic and extrinsic. It was an awakening of the soul to higher conceptions, to nobler aspirations, and a strenuous straining against the bars and chains that kept it confined in mediæval dungeons.

Perez's literary powers ripened at a time when this struggle had taken a firm hold on the Jewish community. And he became its interpreter, its artist, its priest. And as the evolution pushed forward he marched along with it. He never closed his eyes and heart to its progress or to its strayings. At times he even led the way. Occasionally he lagged behind, but he was always in the procession, always in line. And very seldom in any other capacity than that of

the artist, the interpreter of events in the light of emotions, the translator of mass-movements in the terms of the individual's feelings and soul-activity.

The great movement toward light in the Russian ghettos began with a revolt against the old religious fanaticism and the synagogual rule over the community, and into this struggle Perez came when a youth of about twenty. His first literary productions were poems and songs satirizing and denouncing the evils of the old order of things. Like all youthful attempts of this kind, their artistic value was quite meager. But Yiddish literature being so young and so poor at the time, they were welcome.

This battle didn't engage Perez's attention for long. It was soon realized by him that the spiritual condition of the Jew in Poland was to a high degree the result of his economic misery. His first impulse was to join the movement of the awakening proletarian in the small ghetto towns. In prose and poetry he gave artistic expression to the class struggle, to the ideas of class solidarity and class division that were just dawning in the minds of the Jewish workers in lagging Russia. He also drew a number of proletarian types, their condition of life and state of soul, that became classic and won

for him the love and admiration of the entire revolutionary youth of the Jewish Pale. For quite a while Perez was identified with the workmen's movement. He was its artist, its literary exponent and interpreter.

That was his first impulse, but his spirit grew, his genius developed and spread until it became as wide and as deep as the entire Jewish nation. The rays of its soul fell on all classes and factions, on all hills and dales and plains of the Jewish people. And soul rays always bring love, and sympathy, and consolation. The great artist, the true genius, never despises, never hates, for he is like a father to all he creates. He may be harsh, he may denounce, he may punish, but the note of deep sympathy is never absent. The basis of true art is thorough understanding, and understanding that grows out of feeling is the strongest bond between human souls.

It was a gradual development, a gradual climbing of the sun from the low depths of the horizon to its zenith in the center of the sky. At first his rays fell on the exterior of the Jewish ghetto. He saw more of the material, more of the physical, more of the flesh. He saw the misery, the uncertainty, and the dread in which the millions of Jews existed in

that cursed country. He saw the great physical tragedy of the entire race—the marsh of poverty in which they all wallowed; the tradesman, the handicraftsman, the worker, the agent, the student, the rabbi. He perceived the darkness that prevailed everywhere in the community, in the Cheder, in the *Yeshiva,* in the communal councils, in the Rabbinical chambers, in the family. He saw it all at the beginning, in all its physical harshness, and drew it as he saw it harshly but sympathetically. He blamed fate and quarreled with the God of Vengeance. To the afflicted Jew he brought words of comfort and consolation. He urged him to make a superhuman effort and lift himself out of the mire—for he knew the Jew was superhuman and possessed the strength for rising above condition, even above the decrees of inexorable fate.

This purely physical view didn't remain with Perez for long. Gradually he began to temper it with a spiritual insight. And in proportion as the depth of the Jewish spirit was revealed to him, the smaller the physical tragedy appeared. The poverty of bread vanished before the riches of the soul; the ignorance of worldly knowledge disappeared before spiritual fortunes. Not that Perez ever lost sight of Jewish

material suffering, or of the great historical crime that all Christian nations have been committing against the Jew. Not that Perez wished to minimize the tragedy of our long exile; not that he attempted to cover up our defects, our weakness of soul and spirit that resulted from these nineteen centuries of lamb life among the wolves.

Perez sought only to uncover to the Jew, to his own race, the mainspring of the wonderful power that is hidden in his spirit. He sought to make the Jew, the young Jew, conscious of his strength, of his racial and national force. He sought to reveal to him the great secret of the ages, the great mystery of Israel's everlasting vitality.

He sought it in the wonderful manner that artists always seek for solutions of mysteries—unconsciously, unknowingly. A spirit descends upon them, a restlessness enters their soul, and their artistic senses are aroused, excited to a state of ecstasy. Then, of a sudden, the inspiration comes. The light breaks, and the artist sees the great truth.

Perez perceived a supersoul in the heart of every Jew from the very lowest to the very highest, and he also discovered a certain resemblance in the quality of his soul. The poor, ignorant laborer who

starves in his underground dwelling with his meek, crushed wife and pale, ailing children, has a bright light constantly burning in his soul which yearns toward the great spirit pervading all life. There is a deep spiritual love for the beautiful in nature, for the beautiful in the flesh, even in the heart of the fanatical Jew who always denounces the flesh as unclean and dangerous. Perez perceives it and exhibits it to all. There is a golden heart in the irritable, cursing housewife who is seemingly a hell to her husband; and there is a fresh spring of true love in the blood of the religious devotee who talks of women as the daughters of the devil created to corrupt man's soul. There is a passion for song, for color, for nature, in the heart of the pious sage who preaches against these temptations of the blood. There is a passion in the veins of the bashful, chaste housewife with lowered eyelashes and blushing cheeks, who hardly dares to exchange a remark with her husband.

The soul element in the Jew, no mattter how high or how low his station in life, how high or low his culture, is the secret of his marvelous power, of his great hold upon life, of the indestructibility of his race. This Perez has preached in the great master-

pieces that he created in the last period of his literary life. And this great soul element that he described and portrayed in all its splendor and glory in the life that surrounded him, he traced to the old Hebrew legend and myth. He discovered its course in the ancient Jewish traditions, religious and social, and followed out its development in all the ages and all the land of the Jew's suffering and persecution in long captivity.

It is the soul-element of the Jew—not his religion, not his national life, not conditions forced on or assumed by him, that gave him that miraculous existence. This Perez has consciously or unconsciously preached to his generation of Jews. And the effect was tremendous because of the method he employed. He brought his great message in the form of a great heart which beat and pulsated as it told its wonderful story. And because that heart beat true and warm, all responded to it. The old and young legend in which Perez breathed the fresh spirit of his great conception captivated the hearts of millions of Jews in all countries. A new light broke in upon us, a new glory had risen, a new happiness, a new joy.

For the stranger, the Gentile, Perez's writing will

be merely a source of beauty; but for the Jew it is much more. It is a source of spiritual strength, spiritual refreshment. It is to him what true art is to those who understand; sweetness and light, beauty and power. Its appeal is to the whole man, to his senses as well as to his spirit, to his flesh as well as to his soul.

The tremendous evolution that the Jews in Russia have undergone in the last fifty years finds its artistic embodiment in the works of Perez.

ABRAHAM LIESSIN

An Appreciation

From EAST AND WEST

July, 1915

Of the small group of Jewish idealists who took up the struggle for literary fame in the expiring years of the last century, none has been so cruelly treated by the hand of fate as the youngest of them, Abraham Liessin. In his little family, misery and misfortune ran their full gamut—beginning with dire want and ending with disease and death. If happiness did ever deign to smile on him, it was so faint and fleeting that it evoked in his heart merely a vague feeling of surprise.

And yet if you inquire in the literary circles of the East Side for the staunchest in spirit, for the most faithful in ideal, for the most uncompromising in principle, none will fail to mention Liessin amongst the very foremost. To appreciate the full value of this fact, one must have breathed the air of East Side journalism in the last half decade. It is an atmosphere filled with the poisonous gases of cynicism and wantonness, an atmosphere that corrodes the spirit, weakens and cools the blood. For one to

retain the vigor and ardor of youth in an atmosphere so enervating, and in the teeth of a fate so cruel, is indeed little short of a miracle.

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Liessin, today, at the age of forty-four, is what he was eighteen years ago, when he first came to this country, a well-known revolutionist from the Jewish ghettos in Russia. He is as œsthetic and passionate in his poetry, as sane and sincere in his Judaism, as critical and ardent in his Socialism. There is this difference, however. Eighteen years ago he was looked upon with suspicion by all. The lines of the various movements were in those days very tightly drawn. The Socialists feared Liessin's Jewishness, the Nationalists dreaded his Socialism. His poetry was steeped too deeply in the Jewish spirit to satisfy the radical, it trembled too powerfully with the passion of revolt to appeal to the conservative. And this intellectual hostility blinded both factions to the chief merits of his poetry, to its beauty and delicacy of phrase, to its intense passion, genuine lyricism.

That was eighteen years ago, when the various "movements" were in their youthful fanatical stages. Today this cloud of bigotry has been lifted, and

were it not for the general indifference prevailing, Liessin would now be hailed as a conqueror. The mockers and despisers of former days are now following the road he had been travelling all alone for so many long weary years.

There must be a spark of divine light in a spirit that can walk all alone and not go astray. For what is divine light if not sincerity of heart united with strength of mind, a warm heart, one with an active intellect. And only people so blessed can proceed without aid in spite of external obstacles.

Liessin's attitude of soul is that of a soldier of righteousness. He is not a zealot. His literary arsenal is free of poison arrows, of treacherous weapons of any kind. His attack is upright, manly, direct; he never exaggerates faults, never takes advantage of slips or oversights. His fight is never personal or for glory, but for truth.

And that is one of the reasons why Liessin stands supreme amongst the publicists of the Jewish press. His judgments of events, his interpretations and conclusions spring from a soil that is fertilized by mind and heart, by intellect and feeling. With him it is neither hard, dry reasoning nor soft vague sentiment. His is one of those rare minds that combine

poetry and philosophy, reason and sentiment in a proportion of perfect harmony.

His style, too, is adapted to his method of thinking. Liessin is one of the very few Yiddish writers who know the great value of style and who possess it. His phrase is fraught with beauty and force; his sentence strikes the imagination as well as the intellect. In reading him all your faculties are aroused, all the strings of your soul are touched. You are urged to think, to feel, to imagine, to fancy to yearn, and to demand at the same time.

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And the material blows of fate that have been aimed at his head for so many years, have they left no marks or traces on his spirit? Has his soul been proof against that power to which most human beings yield so readily?

You must know the man personally to answer that question. For the conception you form of him from his writings is far different from what he is in reality. Read his editorial writings, his leading articles in the Zukunft, the monthly which he edits, and you will imagine before you a worldly man of wide European culture, of broad knowledge, of deep sympathies and high ideals. Read his lyrical

poems, the outpourings of his soul, and you will see in your mind's eye a being athrill with a passion of love of women and yearning with pain for the friendship of man. Read his songs of revolution, and you will picture before you a heart full of revolt against the restraint and bars put upon life, social, economic, and political. Read his ballads of Jewish ancient days, and you will summon up in your fancy a man suffused with those wonderful qualities of the heroes of Jewish history—their humility, modesty, and devotion to God and to their people.

And the composite picture of all these conceptions is that of quite a wonderful man, broad in mind, deep in feeling, active in spirit, steeped in life —ever thinking, ever working, ever living, free from the small, the petty interests and ambitions that fill the lives of most of us, little people with nothing bigger or higher to live for.

Meet him in life—a lonesome man, loveless, shiftless, ungainly in appearance, confined and narrow in his interests. Of beauty—art, of which he created so much, and of which he is such a connoisseur, he hardly, if ever, speaks. Neither will he willingly indulge in discussion of events social, or matters intellectual. He seems to be ever brooding on little

events in which personalities, his own and those of his colleagues, friendly or hostile, are involved. Of these he will speak and speak inexhaustibly, and with a passion and conviction that are woefully exaggerated.

For one who has known the story of this remarkable man, it is not at all hard to find an explanation for this narrowness of actual life and activity in one whose spirit is broad and deep. It proceeds from sick, shattered nerves. His many sufferings have weakened his body and made his spirit over-sensitive.

In the Ghetto, victims of that kind are not at all rare. But very seldom does it happen that the afflicted should succeed in saving his soul from his bodily collapse as Liessin has done; very rarely does the ideal element gain so complete a victory over the material. Liessin has been the great wonderful exception.

Liessin traces his descent from one of the most honored families in the Jewish aristocracy of learning and piety. And perhaps it is this inherited energy that steeled his soul against the assaults of the flesh. In his social and economic theories, Liessin is a materialist, a convinced believer in those con-

ceptions that form the basis of his socialistic philosophy. But in his own personal life, he is like the old Hebrew scholar of the *Yeshiva,* knowing little and caring less for the actual, living only in his thoughts and imagination, constantly building, elaborating, perfecting the realm of his mind and leaving all else to neglect and ruin.

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The tragedy of Leissin's life lies in the completeness or rather complexity of his mental make-up. He is a poet, a publicist, a journalist, a historian, and his attitude to all of them is about the same. He is just as serious and careful with journalism as in his art, just as thoughtful and grave in his publicist articles as in his studies in history. He never lowers his standard, is never disrespectful, never compromising to his pen. His high regard for the written word ill fits the low stage to which journalism and writing in general have been reduced in the present time. To this perhaps more than to his physical misfortune does he owe the terrible hardships he has met with on the road of his material life. Not until two years ago was there a time when this master writer was sure of his next morning's meal or next night's bed.

ABRAHAM REISIN

From EAST AND WEST

August, 1915

Do you want to know the truth about the Jew in Russia—not the dead truth that is inscribed in cold figures of gathered statistics or dry statements of investigated facts, but the living truth that is written in letters of fire, thrilling with the emotions and passions of happiness and sorrow? Do you wish to know the Russian Jew in his Russian ghetto town; do you wish to understand him in all his strength and weakness, in all his beauty and ugliness, in all his virtues and vices? Then take the works of Abraham Reisin, turn their pages slowly, read each sentence, each line carefully; and if you have a heart that can beat in sympathy with others, it will tell you that your quest has been found.

Reisin's art is unalloyed. His productions are not compounded to give lustre or color or flavor. He draws his characters and situations as he sees them in his mind and feels them in his heart; and the fates have blessed him with a mind and heart that penetrate deep into the soul of others.

To be sincere and faithful in art is as difficult as

to be sincere and faithful in other activities of life. The forces that make for compromise are so numerous and so persistent. There is the editor who threatens your bread, and the critic who threatens your glory; there is the colleague who makes you jealous and the vogue that makes you sceptical. Then there are the hidden forces of imitation and worship and fascination that blind and lead astray.

Reisin was beset by all these dangers. He came into Yiddish literature at a period when Russian Jewry was seething with "movements," when the intellectual turned away with disgust and contempt from the actual, and nursed ideals, built castles. It was a period of "constructing" types, of creating men and women to suit principles. Some even gave up the present and turned to the past where their imagination was free to roam in the clouds of phantasy and poetry. Others abandoned the material world entirely and delved deep into the spiritual and religious in all their phases, ranging from the æsthetic to the ascetic.

But Reisin remained steadfast. He knew his mission; he understood his power and refused to be led astray. While Asch was distilling and refining the little Ghetto town in his poetic ecstasy, while Perez

was shedding his rays to warm into life the old Jewish legend, while Pinski was bolstering up the weak Jewish proletariat with marvelous creations of powerful spirits—Reisin was following the sure safe trail of the artist, the trail of reality. God said to him, "Go and see what my children are doing and come and report to me," and Reisin cared not whether they thought that a mission for the Devil or not. He obeyed his God.

Not that any one dared to impute it openly. But Reisin was looked upon with disfavor by the leading Jewish critics of the old world for his "bare realism." "We are tired of those depressing pictures of poverty and sadness and misery that he is forever drawing," they said, "we are tired of those tears of despair, and sighs of hopelessness. We want a literature of the 'New Jew,' the young Jew, the Jew who is full of hope and ambition, the Jew who rises above his misery, on a plane of poetic striving, a strong Jew who has exchanged brooding for action, vain speculating for real building. Give us a literature of what the Jew wishes to be, let the actual die or rest in peace."

It's the old cry that was heard on the continent in every land where the realists refused to enter upon

any compromise. Strange, how the truth annoys us, how we seek out all kinds of excuses for escaping it.

Maupassant was called a pessimist; Zola, a slanderer; Synge, a defamer—all because they told the truth in all its shadows and lights. Reisin was never attacked. None has dared do it. But neither has he received the full recognition for the great work he has achieved. The professional critic has been shy of him; and if it weren't for the tremendous popularity his works have gained for themselves, Reisin would have to struggle hard to maintain his place in the front rank of Yiddish literary artists, where he belongs by all the rights of genius and art.

Will the Jewish Russia as Reisin has depicted it appeal to you or not? If you are not a Jew yourself, or if you stand at a remote distance from the ghetto, it will be rather hard for you to assimilate its spirit, and understand its soul. You will see before you the Jew with all his faults and weaknesses, you will see his pitiful struggling, his helplessness, the comic and tragic disproportionateness between body and soul; you will see all this drawn in clear, bold lines; and yet you will stand before the picture puzzled and confused.

For real and correct as the picture is, it is suffused with an atmosphere of art that gives it a spirit of its own. You may wish to laugh at the Jew's frailities, you may wish to mock his dreams or ridicule his aspirations, but somehow you will have absorbed the atmosphere behind it, and it will hold you bound to the artist's spirit whether you wish it or not, whether you know it or not.

And this atmosphere of Reisin's creation is truly, genuinely Jewish, because Reisin himself is a quintessence of the Jewish soul. He feels deeply and sees deeply, but his point of view is that of the average Jew. He never transports you to the heights of poetic ecstasy, where all appears harmonious and radiant. He never flings you into depths of prophetic wrath, where all seems monstrous and ghastly. He stands on a level with his plane of vision, on a level with the objects he paints and the images he creates.

So if you are remote from the Jewish spirit you will be puzzled or perhaps annoyed. You will see the picture clearly and be tempted to put your own interpretations upon it; but the Reisin atmosphere, the Jewish soul he breathes into it, will interfere and disturb you. You will probably wish to laugh over

those two little Jews quarreling over the comparative fortunes of Rothschild and Rockefeller, but the strange spirit of a delicate pathos will dampen your mirth. You may perhaps be impelled to denounce, as a barbarous gourmand, the tailor who enacts a household tragedy over five potatoes, but the atmosphere of true domesticity and the humanity that surrounds the scene, will make you hesitate and consider. And so on with every scene and every character. Reisin's spirit is there to protect his creations from harm, to demand for them justice and sympathy.

* * *

Pessimism, hedonism, materialism are some of the epithets used to discredit the realist in art. To Yiddish literature, these terms cannot be applied. Reisin, the realist, can by no means be accused of despising life or of debasing it. He loves life passionately, loves its duties as well as its pleasures, its sorrows as well as its joys. The harsh note in his realism is distinctly Yiddish; it's the weakness of the people, the lack of means, of opportunity, the innumerable obstacles, both physical and spiritual, due to a complexity of reasons, which render the Jew

powerless to obtain all that life offers and all toward which he strives.

Wherever Reisin casts his glance he sees the tragic note and he never fails to strike it. Be the character or the situation ever so humorous, even ridiculous, he will inject into it a drop of his own passion, and transform it completely—the humor will be mellowed, humanized by the sadness and pity enveloping it.

* * *

Reisin's art is not a sudden inspiration, an ecstatic mood, a poetic exaltation. His is a steady flame, ever burning in his soul, lighting up all he sees outwardly, and all he feels inwardly. Reisin is as much of a lyric poet as a realistic story teller; and his lyrics are expressions of those emotions and sentiments in which his objective pictures are cast. In them he sings the tragedy of his own life, which is really the essence of the tragic elements in the lives of all Jews, especially of those living and struggling in oppressed Russia and poverty-stricken Galicia.

Thus he sings in one of his very popular little poems:

I yearn for life, for dear, dear life,
So full of joy and charm;
But cannot reach the beautiful
And good,—too short my arm.

In his private life, Reisin is Bohemian, or rather shall we say, a Jewish Bohemian, with no hold on life, no anchorage, no moorings. Homeless, with no bonds of either family or profession or vocation, he is the Wandering Jew, coming or going wherever his star happens to lead him. Other artists with none of his genius, with but a fraction of his talent, and but little of his popularity, are enjoying a life that is more or less secure and certain. But he is ever struggling, ever warring with circumstances. His hard lot has become a by-word in the world of Yiddish writers and journalists.

In his numerous poems where he pries deep into his own soul he never hints at his material sufferings. Probably it is due to a sense of delicacy or pride, but more likely this physical struggle affects his soul but superficially. The gloomy view he has of life proceeds rather from the suffering of the spirit, the struggle of the soul. Love, beauty, power, justice—for himself, for his people, and for all humanity—this is the craving that fills his soul with despair and

gloom. One is inclined to believe that material well-being would contribute very slightly to relieve the sadness in which his spirit is always steeped. The Weltschmerz, as the true Yiddish artist feels it, cannot be soothed by the pleasures of the flesh, nay, it renders those very pleasures painful.

L. SHAPIRO

The Impressionist

From EAST AND WEST

September, 1915

A PALE, quiet face; slow, distracted movements; thin, dreamy and strange; none of that characteristic nervousness and restlessness of the Jewish *"intelligent";* none of that eagerness for discussion, passion for debate, impatience in argument; none of the fire, the vehemence, the "temperament" that so many of our artists display sincerely or affectedly. Occasionally you may see him at a table in his own cafe in the heart of the Yiddish newspaper row; you may watch him writing a tale or a mood, and if you are at all acquainted with his "manner" you will be tempted to scrutinize his face, to search for a gleam or a spark of the fire in the soul of his creations; but you will be sadly disappointed. Always, always the same distracted look, the same dreamy eyes, the same quiet, inscruitable face.

This is L. Shapiro—the exterior of him; the man who has written the most powerful pogrom stories; the man who has given Yiddish literature its very

best impressionistic pen-sketches of the sea; the man who has breathed the spirit of primitive Jehovah into the frail bodies and crushed souls of his present-day Jewish types.

Artistic, fascinating, to be sure; but oh, how strange. We are not attempting to weigh his stories and sketches in the scales of realism; we are not seeking to bring them under the test of truth or fact. We realize from the very outset that we are dealing with an artist who has created a world in his own likeness, who compounds characters of his own elements. And his power of fascination is so great that we are happy to enter into his new world and breath in the atmosphere he has prepared for us. But enchanting as it is, it fails to dominate us completely. That strangeness keeps intruding all the time, and it irritates and disturbs. What is it due to? Is the artist always to blame for his failure to make us captive to his will and power, or are we to assume part of the responsibility?

When Shapiro first appeared on the horizon of Yiddish letters only the eyes of the *"intelligent"* were attracted to him. And by them he was immediately hailed as an original artist, original in his conception and in style. The professional critic

cheered the new manner even before he thoroughly analyzed the substance. It is indeed refreshing to hear a new tone, a new inflection of voice, a new cadence. And the fresh stream that flowed from Shapiro's pen was certainly irrigating by its style and method, if by nothing else. In place of the old conventional language, loose, with no polish or taste or care, he brought a real literary style, refined, artistic, intellectual, and yet wholly free of the labored or mechanical. If for nothing else, Shapiro has earned his place in Yiddish letters for taking it out of its old shabby mold and casting it into a new beautiful form.

Even today, when his very best productions have been in the open light for over a decade, Shapiro's public is very limited. Only those initiated into the more secret recesses of Yiddish literature know of him; and even to many of these he is not revealed in all his subtlety. How to account for it? Partly, because the little he has written appeared in journals of very limited circulation; but more likely it is due to that strange element, that embarrassing subtlety which stamps every character, every situation and every mood which he has conceived and evolved in his artistic soul.

I think of his marvelous short story "The Cross," perhaps the most powerful tale in Yiddish literature, and what a medley of conflicting, colliding emotions pass through my soul. A Jewish young man of the idealist type, a revolutionist, a dreamer, who has forgotten his own race, his own family, in the great struggle for Russian freedom. The one earthly light in whose rays he basks is his Gentile comrade, the daughter of a Count, whose love inspires him to undertake acts for which he is sure to forfeit his life. Pure in his ideals, noble in his love, courageous in his revolutionary struggle—the familiar Jewish revolutionist of ten years ago—those beautiful sons of the Ghetto whose memories will ever be a source of inspiration for all freedom seekers the world over. But see what Shapiro has made of him! Quite casually he at first injects into this noble heart a strange coldness or rather a vague dislike for his mother who sacrificed the best years of her life for his sake. And this hostility is the nucleus which later on grows and develops into a fearful, horrifying Jehovah spirit of wrath and revenge to the ugliest, most brutal limits.

The sting of the pogrom is the poison that transforms this twentieth century idealist, the son of the

most indulgent, most forgiving race, into a monster of the Jehovah period. And that sting is made to pass through that vulnerable spot in the soul of the unfortunate young man, though that sick corner of the heart where the unnatural hate for his mother lies. The conception of the artist is wonderful. From the moment the story enters upon its course of action the reader is swept along by a force mighty and inexorable. He is swept into a world of savages, where the most brutal instincts have full sway. And this hero of the story, this noble young Jew, this refined intellectual and love-inspired revolutionist is seen to rise higher and higher on this swelling tide, springing from the darkest depths of human primitive nature. He drains to the very dregs the cup of revenge that Jehovah has handed him and then issues forth into the free air of civilization to recover and recuperate.

The story is not real, not a line of it can stand the acid test of psychological chemistry. But it is a great, a grand artistic achievement, nevertheless. For an artist has conceived it, nurtured it, loved it, named it with his own light, strengthened it with his blood. The type is not human, but it is living all the same. Call it then superhuman or ultra

human. What is really essential is that it has existence—that a life-giving power, an artist, has created it.

And this is true more or less of all his other pogrom stories. To the Jewish reader even more than to the Gentile do the types seem strange and unreal, for we know the real Jew and we realize his remoteness from Shapiro's creation; and that is why the great masses, who find it rather a difficult task to follow an artist into new worlds, look upon Shapiro as a stranger; and that is why he is somewhat of an enigma even to the more intelligent and real admirers.

And this enigma grows more bewildering when we turn to another phase of Shapiro's art—to his impressionistic descriptions of nature, particularly those of the sea, which he did quite elaborately when he first crossed the Atlantic to this country right after the Russian pogroms ten years ago.

For in this series of sketches, Shapiro is refined almost to decadence. He is always the *"fin de siecle"* artist, in all its vagueness, mysticism and polish. The sea is not a great infinite power Godlike in its immensity and Devilish in its terror. He never conceives it as a devouring monster or an awe-

inspiring colossus. He is charmed by its physical aspects, its battling waves, its foaming billows, the reflections of the "ragged sky into the muddy waters." He watches the sea by day, at sunset, at sunrise, at moonlight and in the darkness of the mists, and paints various aspects in beautiful colors, accurate and artistic.

And interwoven with these descriptions are impressions and little incidents and tales that serve to give to those impressions an atmosphere that humanizes and mystifies at the same time. Once, it's the story of the artist driven insane by the stillness of the sea; then it's the tragic battle of the descending ice-berg against the melting rays of the sun. And another time it's a mysterious suicide leaving behind him an echo of a terror-inspiring name.

That primitive powerfulness, that ruthless strength which is the leading characteristic of the pogrom stories is entirely lacking in these sketches, where it could be introduced much more naturally and truly. Here Shapiro is for once what his face indicates—a dreamy, strange, vague mystic. And we must add one more quality which no face can ever betray—original.

One wonders will those conflicting or rather in-

harmonious elements in Shapiro's artistic make-up ever blend and unite into one power? And if that happens, will it enhance or diminish the value of his art? Shapiro is comparatively young, and he has written very little, even for his young age. Perhaps he is developing now that new harmony of his art.

ZALMON LIBIN

From EAST AND WEST

October, 1915

"WHEN I wish to learn the truth about the life of the emigrated thousands from the Russian pale in their new home across the sea, there is one author I turn to with absolute confidence; it is Z. Libin, our short story writer and playwright in America." This, in substance, is an opinion expressed by the leading Jewish critic in Russia, who is personally acquainted neither with the author nor with the Jewish Ghetto in this country; and there is no doubt whatever that the literary reviewers here, who are acquainted with both, will readily and cheerfully subscribe to the opinion.

Libin is a true son of the Ghetto. He has lived its life in all its tragic and comic phases. He slaved in the sweatshops two decades ago when they flourished in all their evils and horrors. He pined in the tenements in those terrible years, when "lung blocks" and windowless rooms filled the East Side. He knew all those afflictions so peculiar and so familiar to the Ghetto homes—"Shop," Slack,"

"Strikes," "Sack," "Dispossess," "Disease," "Loafers," "Installment," so on and on. He followed in the wearisome path of the more energetic and hopeful who sacrifice their youth in an effort to lift themselves out of the mire into a brighter life. Again and again he fell exhausted by the roadside, again and again he rose to his feet and joined that procession in its march onward. He was in the very hell of the Ghetto life, and passed through its purgatory, and as he went along, his literary mind accumulated and absorbed the material out of which he built the edifice of his great work—his monumental short stories and dramas that will, for generations to come, serve as a life record of the darkest years of the immigrated Russian Jews in this, their new home —America.

Libin's whole personal life, to its very detail, is told in artistic fashion in his best sketches. His bitter experiences in the sweatshop, his struggles with the boss and the foreman, his serious and comical blunders, his love and marriage and the troubles and tribulations that came in their wake, his suffering at the sick beds of his children, his career as a newsdealer and as a writer and dramatist—the numerous disappointments and sorrows and griefs that ac-

companied his every move in life—all is related to us frankly and generously, sometimes with a smile, sometimes with a sigh, and at times even with a good, hearty laugh at his own expense.

And he thus bares his own life not for striking effects, not because it is more dramatic or more interesting than the life of the average East Sider, and certainly not because he seeks personal display. He does it for the sole reason that he knows his own lot to be typical, that he sees mirrored in his own sufferings and struggles the sufferings and struggles of his many thousand brothers in the shop and in the tenement house. And he tells of his own vicissitudes, knowing that they will arouse in others the same responsive notes of laughter or tears as they did in him when they occurred, for their souls are formed of the same stuff and in the same furnace of suffering and sorrow.

And what he did not live through himself, he saw with his own eyes and felt with his own heart. I am speaking now, of course, of the better work of our author, the work which made his name famous in all Jewish Ghettoes here and abroad. In his later days he has occasionally gone astray and attempted to write from pure imagination. But that work really

doesn't belong to Libin, to Libin's spirit and soul. They bear only his name. What is really his, is his in all right. He personally dug out the raw material from the bowels of the Ghetto life, he personally tried and essayed its worth, fashioned and moulded it, and created out of it the stories that thrill our hearts.

Yiddish literature in America began as an adjunct to the revolutionary movement in the late eighties and early nineties, when the East Side *intelligentsia* and youth were seething with Socialism and free thought. In those stormy days the agitator held sway over the minds of the active and responsive elements; and literature was written with the purpose of assisting this dominating power. The agitator dwelt on the evils of the system, on the injustice suffered by the worker in the sweatshop, on the corruption of the state, of the home, of the temples of learning and religion. Hence it was the duty of the literary artist to give proof of these accusations against the present order of society by depicting the horrors of the worker's life, by painting it in colors as black as the pen would permit. And this duty was performed by most literary men of the time with unquestioning faithfulness. They felt it a

sacred duty and knew that the highest praise awaited their fulfilling it. Such was the spirit of the times, the demand of the times.

And into this dangerous atmosphere—dangerous to literary life I mean—Libin came with his artistic talent. He came as unsophisticated, as blind and credulous as the rest. He wanted to be of help to the movement, to do what was proper, and what the agitator considered right and of service. So he began to write of the sweatshops, of the tenements, of the numerous and numberless ills that beset the poor Ghetto workers. He did what was expected of him, what he expected of himself. But neither he nor those whom he strived to please noticed the new foreign note that he, unconsciously perhaps, introduced in his writings. The artist was getting the better of the agitator, the artist was asserting himself in spite of all injunctions and dogmas. It was remarkable, almost miraculous.

Libin saw the tragedy of the worker, but he could not fail to notice the comedy also; he saw the tear of pain in the worker's eye, but he didn't miss the tear of joy, too. For whatever his code and creed were regarding social reform, he instinctively felt that his mission as an artist was to see life as it is,

and depict it in true colors. And thus, Libin has given us the only real picture of the sweatshop, which will stand the acid test of the sternest and most unfriendly criticism. Many others have tried their hands at it—they tried it in verse and in story and in drama, but their success is doubtful. Of Libin's complete triumph there is no dispute.

His sweatshop is not a hell shot up from the devil's domain in the nether regions; his boss is not a demon delegated by Mammon to devour poor workers; his worker is not a lamb born to be slaughtered on the altar of God. Libin's sweatshop is a human institution, and the boss is human and the workers are human. But this doesn't for a moment lessen its terror, nor does it relieve the tragedy of the worker and the tyranny of the boss. On the contrary, it aggravates it because it intensifies the truth, because it makes the conviction doubly impressive.

Libin's sweatshop worker is joyous at times, even playful and thoroughly happy. He will play tricks in the shop and amuse his wife and children at home. And at times this pitiful slave is capable of being unjust to his fellow slaves and too hard on his children. He is human, thoroughly human, and all

these human qualities are his. But in all these phases, agreeable and disagreeable, the keynote of his tragic life is never absent. The reader feels that this unfortunate creature is a product of the terrible sweatshop, he feels it in the expression of his happiness, in the manifestation of his cruelty to his fellow workers or his own flesh and blood. The shop has made him what he is. This is the truth, and it cannot be concealed. And that is why the sweatshop looms up before us so awful and so horrifying, much more so than even in the exalted outburst of the great sweatshop poet—Morris Rosenfeld.

And what is true of Libin's sweatshop is also true of his tenement house which he painted on a much larger canvas and in much minuter detail. Libin's tenement house life is full of the most amusing comedy as well as the most heartrending tragedy. Just, indeed, is the reputation Libin has gained for himself amongst the vast mass of readers of being the greatest master at throwing his audience in convulsions either of laughter or of tears. A humorous sketch by Libin is sure to draw a loud, healthy laugh; a pathetic story by the same author is just as sure to draw a genuine, warm tear from the very bottom of the soul.

Libin is unsophisticated. He is like a child looking out upon life and telling us what he sees and perceives in his limited mind, as if the view were as far and wide as the human mind could possibly reach. And to this deficiency Libin owes all his failures and shortcomings which have been growing and multiplying as he advances in years and in material success. As long as Libin confined his art to the regions of his own sphere, as long as he was satisfied with telling us what he saw and what he felt in his own life or in the lives of people standing on the same plane with himself, his art was genuine. For then he revealed to us souls and hearts, which is the main function of art. But his ambition rose higher than his powers. He gradually abandoned the field of short story and exchanged it for the drama which offered wider opportunities in material returns, but there he failed very badly on the plane of artistic achievement.

For there is very little of the dramatic in the life that Libin lived and observed. Passions do not rise very high in the heart of the sweatshop worker, dramatic conflict is very rare in the dingy tenement home. The dramas enacted there are all inward tragedies, hidden deep in the soul. They are Ham-

letian dramas with all visible clash and struggle missing. To write these dramas, a subtle power is necessary, and even then it's quite doubtful whether they would be acceptable to the audience.

So Libin resorted to the old substitute, to imagination, and instead of dramas he created melodramas. It must be said to his credit, however, that at the beginning of his playwright career he tried hard to be literary and succeeded to a degree in a few plays, but very soon he discovered a new power in himself, a power to concoct melo-stuff that found favor in the eyes of the great masses. The discovery was also made by the managers of the Jewish theatres and before long, Libin became the leading creator of "hits" on the Yiddish stage.

Libin, the sketch writer, the short story artist, has given place to Libin the playwright. For Libin himself, for his material well being, this change was a happy event; but not so for Yiddish literature. Years ago when our author published his little masterpieces in the Socialist dailies and monthlies he eked out a pitiful living by laboring at the cap making trade or by peddling newspapers in the then wilds of the Bronx. Now that he has dedicated his pen to the theatre of melodrama he is enjoying a good in-

come on contract, and is the envy of all his colleagues. Occasionally he relents, takes up the forsaken pen and treats us with an old time story of his. We read it with mixed feelings of joy and regret. We are happy of the power that is still his and grieved at the rare use he is making of it.

Viewed from a different point this regret of ours may be unnecessary. Even as the writer of melodramas, Libin is rendering important service to Yiddish literature. Compared with most of the other productions on the Yiddish stage, his tower is considerably above them. Whatever Libin's plays are not, they certainly are clever, well constructed, full of ingenuity of plot, originality of humor and depth of pathos. His dramas are never stale or inane or coarse. The characters are more or less consistent, more or less real, the atmosphere is always sufficiently illusive to be tolerable to the more cultivated taste. In many respects Libin's melodramas will outdo the very best plays of the kind produced on Broadway.

Libin acts as a restraining power on the Jewish stage. In the last decade, the Yiddish theatre has followed the steps of the American. It has become purely commercial. The box office determines which

plays are to be accepted or rejected. The managers are no longer satisfied with literary triumphs or artistic success, if the receipts are thereby limited. And so it has come to pass that the better dramatists have almost been banished from our boards. Popular successes are always there to push them off and take their place, and the managers, ready as they are to pay lip service to art, cannot withstand the temptations of profit.

So it is quite fortunate that Libin has intervened. He came as a compromiser between the real literary drama and the cheap popular trash. He took a stand midway, satisfying the managers and the mob without at the same time abusing too harshly the tastes of the better classes. His melodramas are tinged and flavored with literature. They serve as an educator to the coarser palates of the masses and as a comforter to the offended palates of the more refined.

We are grateful to Libin for this service he is rendering in the interest of higher dramatic art. But we would be still more grateful to him if he remained in the field of story writing, the field to which his real talent belongs, the field he had so successfully and beautifully cultivated for us and for

himself in those happy years when he was an artist for art's sake, when he wrote from an inward impulse, from an inspiration of the soul, when his art was nothing else but an ideal, pure and sacred.

JONAH ROSENFELD

From EAST AND WEST

November, 1915

A PAINTER of sadness, grief, fear and horror in their sombrest colors, when they border on morbidity; a portrayer of love, passion and lust in their decadent stages, when they approach degeneracy—this is Jonah Rosenfeld. Like all really great artists he cannot be labelled as belonging to this or that school. He has been called a Decadent, and compared to Andreyev; but if decadence means a disregard for truth or a revolt against actuality, Rosenfeld is not one of its votaries. His characters may be abnormal, his situations revoltingly inhuman—but the keynote of realism is never missing. The thrill of life is always there. Every story he relates throbs and pulses with red blood—sickly, infected, at times even poisoned; but red, nevertheless, red and alive.

Rosenfeld has no eye for the normal. To set his imagination in action, an element of abnormality must be present, either in the characters or in the situation. His concern is always with psychological

analysis. He cares little for plot. Action is always subordinate and at times missing entirely. Yet many of his stories are interesting as stories. They grip the attention of the popular mind that responds most readily to the dramatic appeal.

What more ordinary an event than the casual overhearing of a remark regarding the death of a young woman in a neighboring street! But in Rosenfeld's story, "An Acquaintance," the remark falls upon the ears of a hypersensitive, morbidly imaginative mind, and what a remarkable effect it produces! This strange man had seen the woman just once in his life, but the news of her death has suddenly rendered her an intimate friend to him; and, with wonderful psychological insight, he proceeds to reconstruct the tragedy of her life, from the few details of dress, gestures and glances which he had gathered on that single occasion. And in a subtle, mysterious way he grafts the tragedy of her life on his own conscience.

"Were she alive, it would never occur to me to consider her an acquaintance, but that sudden death worked a miracle. I felt that I knew her, that I even fathomed the remotest recesses of her soul, which she had kept hidden from all else."

And he goes on revealing her life to us; while we stand with bowed heads over her corpse. This background of death intensifies the morbidity of the narrator, and produces an atmosphere of strange sadness about us.

"She was sitting on a log close to the door. Near her was a red headed young man with a red beard, red moustaches, red eyelashes, his eyes even gleamed red. It was easy to guess that he was her husband. His legs were crossed. His attire bespoke the day—the holy Sabbath; a white paper collar; no necktie; a cheap, close-fitting suit with green stripes; a high polish on his shoes. But there was no sign of the Sabbath in her dress. Her waist was calico, though spotless. She looked older than her years; her face grave and embittered, mellowed by an appealing tenderness which emanated from her big brown, almost girlish eyes. She sat there quietly, very quietly, sunken in painful silence. It seemed that the peaceful Sabbath spirit that reigned all along the street failed to reach her. She looked so lonesome and forlorn. It cut my heart."

And he proceeds to speculate on her past. "She must have been a sympathetic girl, ardent and quiet, the kind that is attractive to men. Yet did she

marry that red-headed creature. She, doubtless, hates him, but I am sure nobody knows it. Her sorrow is buried deep in her soul. . ."

"I crossed the street to a spot from which I could observe her better. She felt my presence and my glances, and she blushed continuously. Perhaps she also read my thoughts, and knew that I shared her opinion of her husband. Perhaps, too, she had dreamt once to meet and marry a man like me. . . Yes, perhaps she even had loved a man like me. . ."

Finally her eyes met his. "She looked at me as if she had known me a long time. I also thought her eyes very familiar, familiar and near. . ."

"Now that I knew she was dead, my heart grew heavy just as if I had lost a dear friend. And in the innermost depths of my soul, I felt a shadow of a thought stirring—the thought that somehow, in some way, I was concerned in her death; that somehow, I don't know why, but somehow, I was to blame.—Strange, indeed.

Even simpler in theme is the moving story, "Protracted into the Sabbath." In it all the characters are normal with perhaps the one exception of the little boy who is narrating the story. The situation is a struggle between a command of God and

an elemental instinct in the heart of a pious Jew. His child has died on a Sabbath day and to sorrow on the Sabbath day is strictly forbidden. The mother is too weak, too human, to think of God. The other children are too young to realize God's word. He alone knows his duty, and struggles to perform it. Even while watching at the bed of the expiring soul he sternly commands that the Sabbath feast be prepared. And when death finally comes with the setting of the sun, he allows but a few moments of an outburst of grief to the weak, prostrated mother. Then he bids her light the candles. "He is still ours, as long as the Sabbath lasts." (Such is the traditional belief.) "Don't cause him grief by your tears. Remember, it is the holy Sabbath!"

And when she hesitates, he grows impatient. "Feige," he almost shouts, "It's the Sabbath. You are forgetting yourself!"

He supervises the lighting of the candles and the spreading of white Sabbath cloth on the table. Then he dons his Sabbath coat and high hat and proceeds to the Synagogue to "praise the Lord and rejoice in the Sabbath."

"All traces of grief vanished from his face on stepping into God's house. He prayed more devout-

ly than ever, he carefully exchanged the cheerful Sabbath greetings with all his friends and neighbors."

Coming home he finds his wife crying and wringing her hands. He looks at her sternly, greets her, and then enters the death chamber to greet his dead child. In a loud unfaltering voice, he then proceeds with the usual program of songs and hymns.

What a wonderful, what a weird, ghastly performance! The little boy who has been following his father in awed admiration all through the terrible evening, finally breaks down into a delirious faint. The nerve-wrecking strain snaps at last. What a relief!

This literary gem is purely a study in psychology. Yet it is fraught with dramatic interest. Each little event, the entering and leaving of a room, the slightest remark or sound, or mere gesture or glance strikes us with extraordinary force.

There is very little of beauty and tenderness in the world in which Rosenfeld's characters dwell. The homes are dreary and cold and miserable. The souls are crushed, melancholy and restless. Here and there a bolder heart appears—but its strength is spent in religious austerity or in vain, coarse protes-

tations. Even the children are meditative and sad. The girls are in constant dread of spinsterhood; the married women are slaves either to the husband, to the children, or to the home. Even parental love hardly ever comes to the surface; now and then it betrays itself in an act or in a phrase, but it quickly withdraws its face as if afraid of the light. It is a world of "death and night"—the name chosen by the author for the collection of his stories.

The wretched Jewish life in Russia is not all what Rosenfeld presents it to be. It has poetry and beauty, and it certainly abounds in love and kindness. But Rosenfeld has no eye for that. His imagination becomes active only when the shadows of death and night descend. Most of his tales happen at midnight or in the evening, and very often in cold or dreary weather.

Here are some scenes of the Home, the typical Jewish home in a small Ghetto town in Russia—the home as Rosenfeld sees it in all its wretchedness and misery.

"Early in the morning the hubbub commences.

"The sisters have taken each other's waists by mistake. One misses her hairpins, the other has lost a stocking, the third is looking for a shoe; Leizer, the

brother, has mislaid his belt; the father is hunting for his prayer-shawl; the mother is helping all in their various efforts. General confusion—a rush hither and thither. Then all make a scramble for the water pail. Every one wants to be the first to wash. . ."

This is the morning scene all year round, summer and winter. Finally they all leave the house. Abraham, the father, drives away in his little wagon; Leah, the oldest daughter, goes to the factory; Zelda, the younger, to the dressmaking establishment; Leizer, the son, to the carpenter shop; Kreine, the youngest, to the milliner's. The mother, Beile, is the last one to leave with a heavy basket of eggs on her arm.

"Beile locks the door. The beds are left unmade, and in the kitchen stand all the pots and dishes, unwashed. Every night the question of washing the dishes is raised, each shifting the job to the other, and all refusing to do it. The mother argues that she is old, that she works hard all day, so she ought to be spared this additional work at night. She adds that all her sweating is done for the home. To this Zelda replies that she works still harder. 'Bending your back over your sewing is much harder than go-

ing about with a basket on the arm.' And she, too, works for no other than the 'home.' Then Leah presents her argument: 'What about my toiling? To stand all day on one's feet is much harder than to sit and work.' Kreine still remains, but she also refuses. If they only knew how she is driven about all day from one errand to another, they would not put this additional task upon her.

"So the dishes again remain unwashed. The family gathers at night for supper. This over, Abraham immediately goes to bed, be it winter or summer.

"All day the family is working; each one is living in a world of his own.

"Abraham is out in the street with his little wagon, waiting for customers. In the winter he thinks of the warm bed at home and of the hot soup that is waiting for him there. In the summer he thinks of the terrible heat and figures how long he will have to wait before coming home, where he will be able to wash his face with cold water.

"Beile's thoughts depend on her day's business. If the sales are good she is happy and impatient for the night to come, so that she can tell of her luck. And if, after walking all day, her purse is

empty, she resolves not to mention it at home. She pours out her misery to another woman, an acquaintance in the market place.

"Zelda dreams of a young man who will fall in love with her (She is pretty). Of a sudden she will give up her job. She will be happy and recall these hard days of work and suffering, when she had to toil 15 hours a day for 13 rubles a month, and when she couldn't afford to buy a baked apple of little Sarah who comes every day at the dinner hour. She will wear a beautiful dress and proudly relate to all that she is the daughter of a mere pushcart peddler. She will cook meat twice a day.

"Kreine thinks only of being sent on an errand when she will get a tip, a penny for a glass of tea; and Leizer dreams of becoming a 'boss' some day, and of having a sign suspended outside of his shop with big letters: Carpenter Shop, Leizer Yubelnick.

"Leah never bothers about the future. She only wishes for the Sabbath to come; for on Sabbath she can sleep a little longer. She never gets enough sleep on weekdays.

"And Saturday is really the best day for the family. Saturday morning there is no quarreling. Leah stays late in bed with her sister Zelda, and they tell

each other stories. Then they get up and help each other comb their hair and put on their corsets. The brother has gone to a cafe very early, where he sits leisurely at a glass of tea. The mother has on her white kerchief, and the father his holiday coat. Kreine has put a blue ribbon in her braid. And in the afternoon when the elder girls leave the house for a walk, Beile escorts them to the door and looking after them as they proceed down the street, she thinks: 'How I wish they were both married'; and coming to the house, she says to the father, 'You hear, they both can be led under the canopy at the same time.'

"Abraham takes off his big boots and stretches out on the bed his bare, dirty feet. Beile lies down near him. They contemplate the ceiling for some time, and thus thinking their eyes close. Beile sleeps quietly, but Abraham begins to snore.

"When they awake, they feel a heaviness oppressing their hearts. The Sabbath peace has gone together with their sleep. For a few minutes they lie quietly. Then one drops a single word to which the other responds. Their remarks grow longer and frequent until they find themselves carrying on a conversation. Both talk at the same time. He does not

hear what she is saying, neither does she follow him.

" 'Beile,' he looks at her and meeting her eyes, he continues, 'I sometimes figure how the poor—'

" 'Those fellows—what do you mean, you donkey—'

" 'For instance the money I put up every day for the pushcart—'

" 'It costs me ten kopeks a day. Just think, three rubles a month—'

" 'For this sum we could prepare an excellent soup—'

" 'In three months I could buy a cart of my own—'

" 'Soup sufficient for all—'

" 'And what a cart—'

" 'Now we go dry every day—'

" 'Yes, we are drying up.'

"Abraham happens to overhear the last word. The conversation stops for a few minutes and both think of their 'drying up.' They again exchange sighs and groans, and when they have had enough of that, their glances begin to wander to each other and they strike up another conversation.

"They have a great deal to talk about, but they find it difficult to bring out the words from their 'inside.' Finally they take up the topic of their children.

" 'It's time the girls got something,' says Beile. 'When I was Leah's age, I had been married five years and had a son.'

"The last word reminds her that that son died three years ago.

" 'Woe to his mother. So young and with a face so bright, he lies rotting in the ground.'

" 'Wouldn't it have been better if I were in his place? What am I—but an old broken skull. What good am I? What can I do for the girls? If he were alive I wouldn't have to worry. 'Mamma!' he said, 'I won't marry until I get husbands for Leah and Zelde!' And he really didn't marry. Woe to his mother.'

Abraham lies gazing with glassy eyes at the ceiling, and his wife's words come pouring into his ears. His heart grows heavy. He sees his dead son standing before him. The house is hushed, but one feels as if the soul of the dead is walking about on tiptoe; and in the stillness, a voice seems to be talking in the language that only souls can understand, a language that only hearts can respond to with a sigh or a groan. They both lie there in silence, until the day steals out of the house and night steals in.

" 'It's dark,' says Beile.

" 'It's dark,' Abraham answers.

"Both rise, stretch and yawn. For a few minutes silence prevails.

" 'I don't feel quite well,' Beile says.

" 'Neither do I,' says Abraham, shriveling up. A loud yawn is heard.

"They both say their evening prayers, and then exchange the usual Saturday greetings. Silence again.

" 'Will you stay in the house?' Beile asks, wrapping herself up in her shawl.

" 'I will go to see a neighbor,' he answers, somewhat vexed.

" 'And I will go to see a woman neighbor,' Beile says.

"She turns down the lamp. Both go out and the house remains empty."

What a cheerless picture—not a ray of love, not a spark of joy, even Sabbath is spent in sad thoughts and in bitter quarrels. The Sabbath afternoon-rest, which has been considered the symbol of peace since the Talmudic days, degenerates into a disgusting snorting, followed by disconnected foolish conversation.

And yet the entire picture is strictly and artistically

realistic. It is the home viewed from a certain angle, the home studied in a cold gray light, drawn in white and black, with no poetic coloring, no sentimental shading. It is the home as it impresses a sensitive soul that responds only to sadness and sorrow.

The home forms a background to many of Rosenfeld's strictly psychological tales. The Jew is domestic; a home builder, a family lover. Every individual of the race stands out in best relief when seen in a home atmosphere; his mental processes are best analyzed when taken in connection with the family group. And this is another striking evidence of how faithful our author is to life and reality. His entire perspective is correct, the subject as well as the background, as well as the atmosphere.

Here is another family scene. The story is of a weak, hysterical, morbid woman growing faint and losing consciousness in the falling shadows of a cold winter evening. Rosenfeld finds her in her home surrounded by her little children's prattle of darkness and fear that freezes up the very blood in the mother's veins.

" 'Mamma, it's dark'," a child's voice is heard in the dark room.

" 'Mamma, light the lamp'," another childish voice.

The mother lies in bed troubled. Her husband is in the factory, four versts out of town. He has left home without his coat—how will he get back in this cold weather?

" 'Mamma, I'm cold.' "

" 'I, too.' "

" 'Come into bed.' "

The children ply her with silly questions and she keeps thinking of her husband. She is sure he will catch cold. What a terrible storm!

The children talk of the wind blowing over the room, and of the black cat that cannot be chased off the quilt.

When they stop talking, her imagination sets to work. She sees her husband covered with sweat, hurrying out coatless into the cold air to get home. The wind strikes him full in the face. He comes home, coughing, sick! Immediately he gets to bed, refusing to eat or to tell of his pain. At night he awakes in high fever. No money for a physician—and now he is lying on the floor—dead.

The children resume their prattle. They ask her for stories about robbers. Her fear and nervousness

keep on growing. The children feel her shivering and cold. " 'Mamma's feet are cold. Let me warm you'." " 'Me, too'."

A pause. Then they begin to prattle about ghosts and spirits that wander in the night. They are afraid. They imagine somebody is knocking at the shutters. They embrace mother and ask if she too is afraid.

" ' Mamma, you once had a little girl. You told us so. She died. Why did she die?' " " 'Was she a pretty girl?' " " 'Is she now lying in a grave?' " " 'It must be cold there. Snow and mist'."

" 'Did you have a father, mother?" ' " 'Did he die?" ' " 'And your mother—did she die also?' "

And so they go on prattling their sombre and sad questions. Finally the father comes, and then only is she discovered, lying unconscious in the embrace of her little ones.

The characters, the atmosphere, and the background in this sketch form a marvelous unity. The night, the frost, and wind, the cat, the prattling children all combine to awaken these morbid thoughts in the weak, nervous woman. She lies in her bed, helpless, unable to offer the least resistance. Each sombre suggestion forces her soul a little nearer to the dark seas of death. Her own home, her own

family, the sources whence she draws her very life, are the agents of her destruction. They are one with her weak, morbid spirit, one with her nervous, fear-laden soul.

Sorrow, sadness, night, and death everywhere. Rosenfeld discovers them in the peaceful home, in the play of innocent children, in the love of young hearts, even at the wedding festivity. He rarely tells a story without the presence of the suggestion of death in it.

They are alike in their morbidity—the respected, well-to-do Cantor, who hears nothing but praise from his community, and the coachman who stands alone in the cold winter night waiting for a fare. The joy of living is never present in any of his characters—be they rich or poor, coarse or refined, healthy or sick.

SHOLOM ASCH

An Appreciation

From EAST AND WEST

December, 1915

WHEN the future historian of Yiddish literature will survey the range of its highest peaks in the first century of its life his eye will rest simultaneously on Perez and Sholom Asch. The particular criterion employed will yield different results as to which one tops the other; but none will differ as to their dominance in the long chain of predecessors and contemporaries.

Sholom Asch was only twenty-four years of age when he created his little epic *"The Town"*; and the eleven years that time has added to his life since have seen his literary powers growing and widening. *"The Town"* is the embryo, or shall we rather call it, the nucleus of his genius. In it are revealed the lyricism of his poetry, the realism of his observation, the romanticism of his dreams, the paganism of his philosophy. In it we trace in delicate outlines the old and the young Jew, the Jew of the vanishing patriarchal security, and of the new civilized unrest, the Jew of traditional faith and absolute trust in

God, and the Jew of earthly ambitions and lowly ideals. We perceive them emerging gradually, almost imperceptibly, from waves of poetry that beat from the soil below and the sky above. And real as these figures are, they seem delusive and romantic, submerged in the overpowering seas of emotion.

"The Town" is the keynote to Asch's genius and art. In his succeeding work his portrayal of men has grown more definite and more vigorous. His powerful sense of realism has asserted itself and has led him to delve into the least attractive, the least inviting outlets of the Jew's suppressed energy in the lands of his suffering. His poetic power, too, grew more conscious of its elemental force, of its pagan qualities; and he sought his themes in heroes of Biblical days, in the clash of primitive passions and primitive gods and also in the new paganism of modern revolutionary literature.

The first generation of Yiddish literature suffered greatly from the danger that ever lurks in the highways and by-ways of art, the danger of tendency. To teach, to enlighten, to expose, to destroy, to build —each literary light of our early period chose one of these for his motto and aim. Even Perez was beset by this peril most of the time—traces of the ef-

fects are to be detected in some of the most artistic works of this period.

Perhaps this was inevitable. The Russian Jew of the Ghetto towns in the last quarter of the nineteenth century had much greater need of the reform and enlightenment of knowledge than of the edification and ennoblement of art. Whether it be the result or the cause of circumstances, Asch escaped the greater menace almost completely. His art has very seldom been weakened by tendency, has very seldom been made to serve a purpose, a cause, be it ever so high, ever so sacred to his own soul. In the terrible revolutionary upheaval in the Jewish towns of Russia at the beginning of this century, when the entire Jewish youth was drawn into the vortex and confusion of strife, Asch remained loyal to his art. Not that he was indifferent to the momentous events, not that those terrible days failed to stir his soul and heat his blood. Nay, he saw all, he absorbed and responded. But this he did not as a worker, not as a participant in the struggle, not as a zealot, or a believer or soldier; but as the artist, as the dreamer, philosopher and interpreter and painter of emotions and impressions.

This is also true of his attitude to the agitation

over the Jewish problem that shook Russian Judaism in those days of storm and unrest. The questions of Zionism, nationalism, cosmopolitanism, the revival of Palestinism, the amalgamation of national and revolutionary principles, the neo-*chassidism,* these and many other creeds that sprang into life during those memorable days influenced Asch not as a crusader for one cause or the other, but as an interpreter of them all, as an artist purely and faithfully.

In the comparatively short period of his literary activity, Asch has gained wide popularity in the cultural spheres of Russia, Germany and Poland. His dramas have often appeared in the leading theatres of Berlin, Warsaw and Petersburg. His stories have been welcomed in the best periodicals of those countries. Though one of the youngest of Yiddish writers, his fame in the non-Yiddish world has not been equalled by any one of his predecessors and contemporaries.

How to account for it? Wide popularity doesn't necessarily proceed from superior qualities, recognition in strange lands isn't always the result of merited triumphs. But in the case of Sholom Asch such is the truth. The young Yiddish literateur has entered the world of fame by his own effort, his own

power and strength. No accident of any kind has assisted; the hand of fate was entirely absent.

The international artistic world was first attracted by the marvelous canvas on which his work was wrought. That background of nature; those living, musing, feeling suns and clouds and streams and rocks and clods of soil and blades of grass; the soul that throbs in dark recesses of the forest and exalts in the beams of the sun; the voice that cries out God's love and tenderness and sympathy from the depths of the darkness at night and the glory of light by day—this has struck a responsive chord in every artistic soul that had the good fortune of reading our author either in the original or in translation.

The nature element in Asch's works is characteristically his own, and also beautifully his own. For Asch deals with nature just as he does with his human beings. He paints it faithfully, realistically, but while he draws the lines and puts on the colors, he breathes into it his own soul, the warmth of his own blood. Unlike the Biblical legend of God's voice being heard only in the gentle breezes, Asch's tenderness and gentleness pervade all manifestations of nature—be it a stormy sea, a haunted wood,

frightening shadows or oppressive skies. For to Asch all that is living is good and beautiful, even the evil and ugly—God is in all.

And perhaps it is this quality more than any other that has rendered Asch's men and women, his situations and conflicts, so acceptable to all readers among Jews and other people. Asch has tempered realism with idealism, he has breathed his own romantic spirit into the hard facts of life. He has exalted the commonplace into the higher plains of dreamland and fancy.

In the hands of the ordinary craftsman this task would lead to a bungling in one direction or another. Either the realistic element would be weakened by the idealistic or vice versa; and critics would deplore the grafting and advise pruning. But in the hands of the master, the marvelous feat was accomplished. The harmony amongst the various elements renders the edifice a veritable wonder of conception and execution. The critic dares not interfere, dares hardly to analyze and examine the elements individually. He is overcome with admiration.

Rigid realists, I mean artists who believe in di-

vesting themselves completely of their heart and soul and paint things as their thinking mind sees them; critics who believe in the supremacy of this mode, will find little to praise and commend in Sholom Asch. For a realist of this kind, he most surely is not. From this category of artists he stands removed at a distance immeasurable. But it is equally wrong to call him a romantic and poet, and relegate him to the regions of art that are visited only for refreshing youthful dreams and invoking fancies and sentiments, for a temporary warming up of the soul and heart.

For Asch is a realist, only he is more than that. If the suffering of his creatures doesn't make us storm and rage, if the cruelty of his characters doesn't call forth denunciations, if the situations and events, be they ever so beautiful and poetic, inspire in us but a vague longing, a soft tender yearning and nothing else—this is not because the realism of the character and situations are defective but rather because they are inspired with a peculiar spirit, because they are immersed in a peculiar atmosphere—the spirit and atmosphere that are wholly and peculiarly Asch's own.

Asch sees the drama of life in all its tragedy and

comedy as clearly as the most faithful at the shrine of realism. He sees the injustice of nature and the perversities of man; the heroism of the obscure and the weaknesses of the conspicuous. And what he sees, he paints. The pictures are all there, hundreds of them, crowding all the pages of his many volumes But over them are shed the rays of Asch's artistic soul, and they are transformed to the vision of our conscience. A softness, a tenderness is wafted over them, and we absorb it together with the outlines and colors of the scenes proper.

Thus we behold the Jewish daughter sacrificing her dark tresses, the pride and divinity of her pure and delicate heart on the altar of fanaticism. We see her struggling against the dark forces of dogma and superstition, and yielding to them. But all the time that this tragedy is being enacted in all its grimness and cruelty, we do not for a moment grow indignant or impassioned in any way. We accuse no one, blame no one, not even fate. For the purity and tenderness that emanate from her beautiful soul absorb also us, and just as she is unable to be harsh or hard, so are we. And together with her we yield finally to the very forces that are exerted upon her. We yield together with her, blindly but sincerely,

overcome by pity and love for the one whose suffer-is just as great, if not just as noble and beautiful.

And we undergo a similar experience while following the tragic fate of little Yosel, the child that was born old in a little Ghetto town of Poland to die young in a Ghetto tenement of the East Side. We follow his frail body and delicate soul in all the stages of their wanderings, on the earth below and in the clouds above. We see him turned back from the gates of this country, sentenced to be torn from his mother and father and cast back across the dark ocean into the arms of an indifferent or perhaps worse relative. We see him dreaming of the great day when he will be permitted to return into the fold of his family. And when his great dream is finally fulfilled, we pass with him through the intense spiritual sufferings that the new life and new environments bring so suddenly upon him. We see him bend and break beneath the burden of his pain; we behold the delicate soul take leave forever of the frail crushed body.

And suffering with him are his parents, his sister; each with his or her tragedy. The atmosphere, too, surrounding the creatures is full of longing and yearning, partings of friends and breaking up of

homes; physical and mental hardships, fear and ignorance and helplessness.

And yet, midst all that, we remain quiet and serene. The heart is filled with pity, the soul is heavy with sympathy and love, the spirit goes out in a vague yearning to those unfortunates. But we are not stirred to passion, our minds are not inflamed. The artist has infused the spirit of his own soul into the tragedy and that spirit casts upon us a vague and dreamy painfulness, nothing more.

It has been said that Asch is defective in the dramatic sense, and yet some of his dramas have met with considerable success in the theatres of various lands. There is plenty of drama, plenty of action in Asch's writings, in his tales as well as his plays. But the effect they produce is rather unique, hence the misjudgment, hence also the difficulty experienced by the producers in accounting for his successes and failures with the various audiences.

This peculiar quality, this characteristic atmosphere with which Asch endows all his creations, is both his power and his weakness. Its strength consists in its being wholly his own, in the wonderful appeal it makes to the reader, in the transformation it works on all it touches. But it is weak be-

cause it fails to stir the deepest depth of our active self, because it encourages the musing, dreaming tendencies of our natures, because while under its influence, we become too subjective, we feel the heart obtruding itself too prominently in our consciousness.

But Asch is a young man, very young comparatively speaking. Life hasn't yet had time to harden his delicate sensibilities and dull somewhat his tender nerves. When the mellowing, ageing process of time's workshop will be done, Asch will come forth, in the full of glory of his many powers under the control of a strong mind and steeled spirit.

The future holds for us a still greater Asch than the Asch of today. What a glorious and inspiring hope!

LEON KOBRIN

An Appreciation

From EAST AND WEST

January, 1916

FOR a whole generation Kobrin and Libin were the leading writers of Yiddish fiction on this side of the Atlantic. They took up their pens about the same time when they arrived in this country at the age of twenty, and they developed along the same lines, from the short story to the drama and then to the novel. And their success in popularity and in material advancement, was almost identical. In the minds of the great mass of readers and theatre-goers the one name always suggests the other.

Yet how widely different are these two authors in their art—in their conception and handling of themes.

I have spoken of Libin on a previous occasion—of his humor, sympathy, tenderness and gentleness, of the seas of love and pity in which all his tenement house and sweat shop characters are immersed—of the simple truth stamped on the faces of all his

creations, of the characteristic atmosphere and background in each canvas of his painting.

Kobrin belongs to a different school entirely—one that is far more ambitious, and in which it is much more difficult to achieve success. Kobrin has sought for his genre the elemental passions of man at critical moments when they are least controllable, or in beings where they are never under restraint. He has grappled with the elemental forces in human nature and has attempted to draw them in their bareness and brutality, discarding all neutralizing and weakening admixtures.

This is by no means all of Kobrin; but it is Kobrin at his height, Kobrin at his best, the part of Kobrin that has a store of vitality which may keep him alive for a term of years of longer or shorter duration.

And because he has chosen a task so difficult, the critics are at extreme variance as to the success of his achievements. Some go into ecstasies over his dramatic powers, for the clash of elemental forces must necessarily be furious; while others turn from him completely for the utter lack of artistic atmosphere, which gives his products the appearance of journalistic "stories" or of well told anecdotes.

Kobrin has undertaken a most difficult task in-

deed, and if for nothing else, he has merited praise for the very attempt, for the ambitious straining. For this much will be conceded by all his detractors as well as his admirers, that his efforts have all been sincere, artistically sincere. In this field, that borders so closely on the sensationally vulgar and obscene, Kobrin has taken care to keep within the bounds that his own artistic powers have worked out for him. The evidence of an earnest searching into the psychological workings of the characters is plentiful; in his situations too he is always on guard to divert the attention from the mere vulgar to the general struggle between the dramatic agencies. He never forgets his aim of writing literature and not mere stuff for selling purposes.

The effort he unmistakably makes,—how does he succeed? Here we are again on disputed ground. Shall we say that he succeeds in a measure? Perhaps that would be nearest to the truth. The measure, however, will have to be determined by each of his readers according to his individual estimate of the author's merit and failures. Kobrin does not belong to that class of artists whose powers stand above and beyond dispute, whose gifts cannot be reduced

to a measurable size. He is not of the class in which we include Perez, Asch and Reisin.

Rarely does Kobrin write a story that is entirely free of melodramic effects or sentimental garnishing; rarely does he prefer psychological analysis to physical action. And what other explanation is needed for the wide popularity he enjoys among the vast reading masses, and the doubtful fame that is his in the narrow circle of better critics?

His admirers compare him to Maupassant and to the Russian Tchechov for the bare stark realism of most of his writing. This also is true within limits. His themes do indeed remind one of that school of unconventional artists who put truth above all else, but not so his treatment and execution. He lacks the art of the Frenchman and the psychology of the Russian.

The future historian will undoubtedly award a respectable place to our author. For whatever our opinion be of him when measured by the absolute standards of art, he certainly has earned a position in the scheme of development of our literature. As indicated above, Kobrin was the first to introduce the struggle of primitive passions into Yiddish Art—I mean in their beastly savage intensity, in their un-

bridled ferocity. Others have followed his footsteps and far outstripped him; but he was the pioneer and for that, Yiddish letters will always owe him a debt of recognition and gratitude.

About one year ago a leading Yiddish monthly published a short serial of Kobrin's which displayed the best and most characteristic powers of the author. It was called "Apartment No. 3" and is an attempt at portraying the inside of a disreputable house in all its horrors, crime and sin. The mistress of the apartment is an elderly woman, kindly, motherly in her conversation, firm in her religious belief, but devoid of all human feeling where "business" is concerned. The hero of the story, the procurer, is the impersonation of all animal strength and passion, a savage ready to kill at the least provocation, always plotting destruction of his prey, and yet irresistible in his fascination for women, be they ever so virtuous, ever so strongly intrenched in their principles of morality and purity.

The story is frank and brutal — event follows event, the innocent victims are dragged to their fate by savage instincts and inflamed passions. And each event is crowned by a melodramatic catastrophe, boiling and raging in the well known style. Now

and then the author pauses for a moment to attempt a short scrutiny into the souls of his creatures, but he is either too weak or too busy for such a task. Just a dash or two and he hurries on with the story. The events, the dramatic clashes, rush before the eyes of the reader in a constant whirl of flesh, glowing with forbidden lust, of eyes ablaze with sin, of depravity running mad in an outburst of riot. And amidst this raving and raging of passion, knives are drawn, shots are heard and innocent victims are hurled to death.

Is it a story of the dime novel variety? No, though the resemblances are very many and very striking indeed. True indeed, there is too much action, too much drama and far, far too little character drawing and psychological insight; true also that the "apartment" though drawn in all its physical details. is without atmosphere, without "soul" so to speak. Yet there is an unmistakable seriousness on the part of the author. One can see it in the tone, in the effort to breathe life into the characters, in the signs of restraint at the intensest moments. One must conclude that Kobrin meant well even if he did not succeed well.

This then is Kobrin the artist, so much as there is

of him—possessed of a high sense of the dramatic, a realist, a portrayer of the externals, journalistic in his attempts at psychological analysis—creating good stories but poor characters, good situation but poor atmosphere, and withal sincerely and seriously devoted to his work and to his art, exploiting to the best of his ability all the gifts with which nature has endowed him.

And perhaps that is the reason he devotes so much of his time to the writing of dramas. Kobrin has been identified with the Jewish stage for the last twenty years or so, and to his credit must be ascribed some of the very best tragedies and comedies presented in the Jewish theatre of this country. Unlike some of his colleagues he has never lowered his standard for the gratification of the managers. He is as serious and well intentioned in his dramas as in his stories and novelettes. In all the exigencies of the theatre, in all its compromises with melodrama and popular fads, Kobrin has remained steadfast and faithful to his principles of art. And he has paid dearly for it. He was made to suffer neglect and had the cold shoulder of indifference turned to him at every manager's door. Yet he held out and always came back triumphant.

It was his power of dramatization, his execellent sense of technique of the stage that saved the day for him in the end. It was also his attitude of seriousness, his effort to achieve artistic success that helped him in his troubles. The managers have learned by long and repeated experiences that there is always an audience of some intelligent theatre-goers ready to come and appreciate a work by Kobrin, ready to applaud the managers' willingness and the players' effort to yield to the desires of those classes that are of necessity less numerous than the crowds who are atracted by the cheap hodge-podge of the inferior writers.

And yet it must be said that Kobrin's dramas are far from deserving the name of true literature. The weaknesses we have discovered in his stories are in full evidence in his dramatic works. The plot, and sometimes the idea behind the plot, absorb the attention of the writer to the neglect of all else. There is plenty of physical action, but much too little of spiritual and moral development in his characters. There is also a lack of artistic background, of a distinctive atmosphere that puts the stamp of the writer's soul and spirit upon his work.

In line with his sincere devotion to his art, are Kobrin's labors as a translator of foreign literature into Yiddish. He has indeed devoted a great part of his time to this work with much praiseworthy results. His translations of Maupassant, Zola, Tchechov, and many other European writers are done with sincerity and love. His easy and simple style render him the translator par excellence of foreign authors.